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ABSTRACT

A research project sought to raise reading achievement among senior Kindergarten students at Doncrest Public School (York, Ontario, Canada) to enable them to reach the Kindergarten reading standard and to maintain this level of reading over the summer months. In response to assessment data, the literacy program in Kindergarten was adapted to include opportunities to strengthen knowledge of high frequency words in reading and writing. Elements of a balanced literacy program which were being used in the Kindergarten classes were maintained. Kindergarten teachers added regular independent writing opportunities to the literacy program and scaffolded the children through the process of writing. Building on the reciprocity between reading and writing, attention was directed toward accessing high frequency words previously introduced in guided reading and interactive writing lessons, to secure these high frequency words for use in reading. Gains were made in word recognition and reading levels, and most of these gains were maintained over the summer months. Gains were not made in knowledge of words for writing. Reasons for this were examined and future programming considered. Includes observation survey results and Kindergarten and Grade 1 reading results. Contains a 3-item bibliography and the Kindergarten writing rubric. (Author/NKA)

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Supporting Beginning Reading in Kindergarten with Independent Writing.

by Marlene Waiser

and

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Supporting Beginning Reading in Kindergarten with Independent Writing

Marlene Waiser and Jan Whiteley
York Region District School Board - 2001

The goal of this research project was to raise reading achievement among senior kindergarten students to enable them to reach the kindergarten reading standard and to maintain this level of reading over the summer months. In response to assessment data, the literacy program in kindergarten was adapted to include opportunities to strengthen knowledge of high frequency words in reading and writing. Kindergarten teachers added regular independent writing opportunities to the literacy program and scaffolded the children through the process of writing. Building on the reciprocity between reading and writing, attention was directed towards accessing high frequency words previously introduced in guided reading and interactive writing lessons, in order to secure these high frequency words for use in reading. Gains were made in word recognition and reading levels and most of these gains were maintained over the summer months. There does appear to be a correlation between word recognition and secure reading levels. Gains were not made in knowledge of words for writing. Reasons for this were examined and future programming considered.

Kindergarten literacy practices at Doncrest Public School have included elements of a Balanced Literacy program. Certain elements have received greater attention than others - read aloud, shared reading, guided reading and interactive writing. The assessment of literacy skills of senior kindergarten students in June of their senior kindergarten year and again in September of grade one have revealed areas of strength and weakness. The areas of skill strength link directly with the elements of balanced literacy emphasized in the kindergarten program. Use of shared reading and guided reading has contributed to the development of concepts about print and to early reading skills. Most students have been able to read at Level 3 in June of their senior kindergarten year. The kindergarten standard is Levels 3-5 (based on Reading Recovery reading levels). Those children who could not read to the standard were, for the most part, able to read at Levels 1 and 2. Extensive use of interactive writing has also contributed to knowledge of concepts about print, as well as, letter identification and letter-sound relationships.

Areas of weakness include knowledge of high frequency words for reading and writing. In addition, most students read to Level 3 but that is the minimum level of the kindergarten reading standard. As well, by September of grade one many of the students who had been reading at Level 3 in kindergarten had dropped back and were reading at Level 2 and of those reading at Levels 1 and 2, some had dropped back to Levels 0 and 1. Many students at the lowest levels did not appear to focus on text but appeared to read from memory.

> "A child does have to gradually accumulate a reading vocabulary of known words which he can recognize rapidly and does not have to work out. Only as this happens is the reader's attention freed to work on new words and solve new text problems. (Clay,1991)

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Secure knowledge of high frequency words helps to maintain reading fluency. This, in turn, allows greater access to the meaning of what is read and supports the *construction of inner control (Clay, 1991)*,constructive, problem-solving reading activity inside the child's head. Gaining meaning from text confirms for the reader that the reading strategies being used are effective and in this way, it supports the development of effective reading strategies

> "...what the child writes is a rough indicator of what he is attending to in print, and demonstrates the programmes of action he is using for word production.
> ...writing provides extra opportunities for the child to gain control of literacy concepts. While the child is creating a story in print, the eye and the brain are directed to important features...
> Information gained...from writing becomes part of the network of knowledge the child attaches to familiar words."(Clay,1991)

To ensure that senior kindergarten children know a sufficient number of high frequency words for reading in order to help further develop and secure reading levels at the kindergarten standard, program modifications were made to increase opportunities for shared writing and independent writing. High frequency words are taught through interactive writing and guided reading. These words are made available to students in charts through shared writing and on the word wall through interactive writing. If children need to use high frequency words in their independent writing and are taught to access these words in the classroom, they are likely to learn more high frequency words.

Our goal is to help the children develop a vocabulary of high frequency words for reading and writing to support the development of reading skills. We want to ensure that all kindergarten children are reading to the kindergarten standard by June of their senior kindergarten year and that they are able to maintain their reading levels over the summer months between Kindergarten and Grade one.

The **research question** driving our inquiry is:

Can we increase the word knowledge and reading levels of Senior Kindergarten children through the regular use of guided writing journals in conjunction with the development of a word wall?

Can the reading levels be maintained over the summer from Kindergarten to Grade one?

Strategies:

Elements of a balanced literacy program which were being used in the kindergarten classes were maintained. These included read aloud, shared reading and guided reading, as well as, interactive writing. To encourage the development of a vocabulary of high frequency words, a word wall was created. The shared reading of a weekly message, a simple message of three or four sentences, some repetitive, developed by the teacher, as well as guided reading and interactive writing included a new high frequency word over the course of two to three school days. These words were posted on the word wall. In subsequent weeks and subsequent lessons, the children's attention was redirected to words previously introduced. Opportunities for independent writing were presented from time to time at the writing centre or at the painting centre. The children were directed to write and share new learning or tell about a picture they had painted. At times, their writing was scaffolded by the teacher. The teacher allowed the child to record everything that s/he was able to record independently or with a minimum of support from the teacher, for example, letter sounds in words and the teacher recorded the rest.

Writing journals were given to all kindergarten children in all classes. Three teachers introduced the journals to four or five children at a time and staggered the introduction until all children had their journals. In these classes, the children had an opportunity to write independently once a week, scaffolded by the teacher. The children were directed to write about the unit of discussion, a read aloud or a book read during guided reading. One teacher introduced the journals to the whole class at one time. The children were free to write about the unit or a topic of discussion, a read aloud or any news they wished to share. In this same class, they wrote in their journals daily. Opportunities for scaffolded independent writing were presented at the writing centre and were required once a week. The children generally responded to a read aloud or a classroom discussion.

The journals were spiral bound at the top with the pages layed out horizontally. This enabled the children to draw a picture and write on one page and to have a work page above the story page. Letter formation or high frequency words could be demonstrated or practised on the work page. Teachers could demonstrate word formation skills, as appropriate, on the work page as well.

While writing, if a child required or asked for help with a word which had been introduced through the morning message, guided reading and/or interactive writing, the child was reminded that the word had been introduced and asked if s/he could remember the word and write it independently. This was done to encourage the children to try to remember words. If the child did not know how to write the word s/he would be asked if s/he knew where to find it in the classroom. This was done to encourage the children to remember where and how to access high frequency words. If needed, the child would be referred to the word wall to see if s/he could find the word. Referring children to the word wall encouraged children to attend to the details needed to locate individual words, such as initial sound-letter associations, as well as additional visual information in each word.

Shared writing, where children in a group create a message which the teacher records , had been used infrequently in most of the kindergarten classes. To encourage the children to express their ideas in a natural spoken manner, shared writing was integrated into the literacy program more often, once or twice a week.

Data Collection:

Clay's Observation Survey was used to determine literacy knowledge for all senior kindergarten students in June. Five of the six subtests of the observation survey were administered-Letter Identification which demonstrates knowledge of letter names, the Word Test and BURT Word Test which demonstrate word recognition, the Vocabulary Test which demonstrates the ability to write words accurately and Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words which demonstrates knowledge of sound/letter associations. The Observation Survey was administered again in the fall of Grade one to assess the success of the instructional strategies used in Kindergarten.

Running records were completed in June for each child in senior kindergarten to determine reading levels for each student. They were administered again in September of Grade one.

Teacher observations were also used to support or question strategies, results and outcomes.

In September of 2001, nineteen students, beginning grade one, were new to Doncrest Public School. With fifty nine students in grade one at Doncrest this year, new students represent almost a third of the grade one students. As a result, these children were not included in the data collection for the purposes of this action research project. New students were included in the data for grade one students in September, 2000 but there were only two new students at that time.

Results:

There was significant improvement on the Clay Word Test for reading. In June of 2000, 54% of the kindergarten children were at the third stanine or higher. In June of 2001, 73% of the children reached the same level. By September of 2001, the beginning of grade one, that number had reached 80% compared with 64% in September of 2000. In fact this year, 40% of the children were at the fifth stanine or higher. More children are recognizing high frequency words for reading.

The results of the Writing Vocabulary Test, however, were slightly lower in June of 2001 than they had been in June of 2000, with 50% of the children reaching the third stanine or higher in June of 2001 and 60% in June of 2000. The number improved somewhat by September of 2001 with 56% of students reaching the third stanine or higher but that is still lower than the 66% of children who were reaching that level in September of 2000. Fewer children were able to write high frequency words.

Observation Survey Results				
	Percentage of children at or above the 3rd stanine			
Assessment	June, 2000	September,2000	June, 2001	September,2001
Letter Identification	100%	100%	100%	98%
Concepts About Print	88%	N/A	81%	N/A
Word Test	**54%**	**64%**	**73%**	**80%**
Writing Vocabulary	**60%**	**66%**	**50%**	**56%**
Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words	93%	100%	89%	98%

Results of running records taken in June of 2001 show that more senior Kindergarten children were reading to the Kindergarten standard than in June of 2000. By September of grade one, in both 2000 and 2001, some children had failed to maintain their reading level but significantly more children were able to maintain their reading level from June to September in 2001 than had been the case in 2000.

Kindergarten and Grade One Reading Results - 2000 and 2001				
Achievement Levels	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Reading Levels	Level 0	Levels 1-2	Level 3-5	Level 6+
June, 2000	25%		75%	
September,2000	53%		47%	
June, 2001	18%		82%	
September,2001	26%		74%	

Analysis and Conclusions:

Improvement in word recognition among Kindergarten and beginning grade one students suggests that changes in practice were working to help students increase word knowledge for reading. The growth in word knowledge over the summer months suggests that in the process of learning words, the children are also learning strategies to decode words, which will also support their reading skills. Results of other subtests of the Observation Survey (Letter Identification, Hearing and Recording Sounds in Words and Concepts About Print) have remained fairly consistent over each testing period. This suggests that improvement in word recognition has contributed to improvements in reading levels. The fact that significantly more children were able to maintain their reading level over the summer months suggests that greater word knowledge can help secure reading levels over the summer between Kindergarten and grade one.

The fact that fewer children were able to write high frequency words accurately may be a result of individual practices in the teacher's writing programs. The use of the word wall for writing was inconsistent among the four Kindergarten classrooms. Not all of the teachers emphasized the use of the word wall to help children record words accurately during independent writing. This may, in part, be a result of the fact that not all the Kindergarten teachers were at school on the same days. Information shared without the opportunity to clarify meaning with the entire group of teachers may have resulted in the inconsistencies among the teachers. With two teachers in the Kindergarten classrooms this year, 2001/2002, we will be redirecting our efforts to incorporate the word wall consistently and regularly to increase children's knowledge of high frequency words for writing.

The classroom teachers observed significant improvement in the children's writing skills compared to previous years, likely a result of increased opportunities for writing in the Kindergarten program. Most children were able to write one sentence or more independently by the end of their senior Kindergarten year. As a result, the teachers are programming a daily writing period for 2001/2002 and this should contribute to greater gains in word knowledge and reading progress.

In response to observed changes in the children's writing skills, the teachers developed a Kindergarten Writing Rubric, using the Ontario Ministry of Education Kindergarten Writing Expectations, as well as, teachers' observations and knowledge of skill development. All the teachers planned and provided the same experience to each class, making and eating pancakes to celebrate Pancake Tuesday. Then each child was asked to write about the experience. The writing of each senior kindergarten child was assessed by all of the kindergarten teachers and the Special Education Resource/Reading Recovery teacher using the rubric together. Through this process, the writing rubric was revised for use in assessing the writing development and writing level of each senior kindergarten student. One expectation of the writing rubric is the demonstrated knowledge of high frequency words in writing. The level demonstrated by each child provides further information to use in assessing knowledge of high frequency words for writing. As the writing rubric will be used at reporting periods, teachers will be able to reflect on whether or not writing vocabulary is developing and perhaps on whether or not word sources in the classroom, like the word wall, are being used effectively to support children with their independent writing.

Kindergarten children are developing many concepts and skills for reading and writing. Skills for writing continue to develop in line with the balance of literacy presented in each Kindergarten program. With further attention to the use of high frequency words for writing and with further links between reading and writing to support the development of word knowledge, perhaps reading levels for an even greater percentage of Kindergarten children will reach the Kindergarten standard and be maintained over the summer months.

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Kindergarten Writing Rubrics

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Reasoning **Communication** **Organization**	*may or may not assign a message to own symbols *message may or may not be clear	*message is accessible to reader (teacher) without retell or reread by student *message has meaning *may write short phrase or phrases only *purpose may be unclear *retells/rereads own writing	*message includes a complete, simple idea *purpose is clear, to communicate message, feelings, experience *writes in sentence form *sentence is simple, complete and clear *vocabulary is appropriate	*message includes ideas or ideas with supporting detail *ideas are connected *vocabulary extends the message *purpose is clear and interesting *sentences are clear and effective *may use more complex sentences *may show evidence of feeling
Conventions	*attempts to print name *uses symbols, pictures, and/or some known letters at random to represent written message/language *visual representation is not organized (placement, spacing, legibility)	*prints first name *uses some consonant sounds appropriately to represent written message/language *copies words; may not be accurate *uses periods randomly *may use other forms of punctuation randomly *uses left to right progression *spacing, legibility may not be clear *may capitalize "I" only	*prints first name using upper and lowercase letters, appropriately *copies words, family names appropriately and accurately *writes some high frequency words accurately *uses beginning, middle, final sounds of words, mainly consonants *begins some writing with capitals, other than "I" *uses periods appropriately one or more times *visual presentation is clear, uses word spaces *uses left to right progression with sweep	*prints full name using upper and lowercase letters appropriately *writes many high frequency words accurately *records many sounds in words, including vowels *uses capitals and periods consistently *uses left to right progression with sweep, completing each line of text *visual presentation is clear, well-spaced, letters well-formed *may use other forms of punctuation appropriately *may include a title

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Marlene Waiser, Jan Whiteley, Lisa Hirsh-Wax, Lisa Kerzner May, 2001.

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